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### Nurturing the virtuous circle

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**Title:**

**Nurturing the virtuous circle: Looked After Children's participation in reviews, a cyclical and relational process.**

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**Authors: Autumn Roesch-Marsh\*, Andrew Gillies+ and Dominique Green^**

\*Lecturer in Social Work, PhD  
 Programme Director, Master in Social Work  
 University of Edinburgh  
 Chrystal Macmillan Building  
 15A George Square  
 Edinburgh  
 EH8 9LD  
 Telephone: 0131 651 3870  
 Email: a.roeschmarsh@ed.ac.uk

+Manager  
 Children and Young People's Review Team  
 Children and Families, City of Edinburgh Council  
 The Fort, 25 North Fort Street,  
 Edinburgh  
 EH6 4HF

^Research Assistant  
 Edinburgh Q-Step Centre  
 University of Edinburgh  
 Chrystal Macmillan Building  
 15A George Square  
 Edinburgh  
 EH8 9LD

**Abstract**

Children's participation in decision making of all kinds is of increasing interest across the world as more and more countries seek to comply with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The participation rights of children who are in the care of the state are of particular concern. Recent research in England suggests that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) can play a crucial role in ensuring that looked after and accommodated children are able to participate in care planning and review processes.

This article outlines the findings of the first Scottish study to investigate the role of Reviewing Officers in encouraging children's participation in reviews. Surveys were collected from social workers, Reviewing Officers and young people after sixty-nine review meetings as part of an action research study. Follow-up qualitative interviews were then completed with ten young people and a focus group held with the five participating Reviewing Officers. The findings suggest that participation in looked after reviews can best be understood as a cyclical and relational process and that taking part in action research may enhance participation practices. While the role of the Reviewing Officer was found to be important, the findings suggest that everyone involved in the care and support of the young person needs to encourage participation processes that are individualised.

**Key words:** participation, looked after children, decision making, reviews, relationships

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## **Introduction**

Could you listen, listen hard and well to what I cannot say except by what I do?

– from the poem 'Trouble is not my middle name' by Liz Lochhead, January 2012

Listening to children and young people and working hard to understand their views, in whatever format they are able to express them, should be at the heart of all social work practice and is the first step in any participation process (Sheir 2001; McLeod 2007). In an effort to comply with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a range of policy, legislation and guidance has been introduced across the United Kingdom and Europe which requires social workers and other key decision makers to take account of the child's views and give these views due consideration in decision making processes

(Gallagher et al. 2012). Despite these requirements, ‘listening hard and well’, as the Scottish poet Liz Lochhead’s poem instructs, continues to be something that social workers are not always very good at. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that most child welfare and protection decision making involves formal, adult dominated groups, where young people often feel bored, embarrassed, confused and/or unable to speak (Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; Leeson 2007; McLeod 2007; Thomas 2011; Van Bijleveld *et al.* 2015).

Children and young people’s participation in decision making tends to be framed as a discreet domain of study without theoretical links to group decision making theory and research (Van Bijleveld *et al.* 2015). The research that has been conducted into the processes and dynamics of group decision making in social work suggests that it is often the chair of a meeting who makes the crucial difference between a productive or unproductive decision making group (Kelly & Milner 1999; Harlow, 2004; Prince *et al.* 2005; Beckett *et al.* 2007; Roesch-Marsh, 2012). It is less clear what impact the chair has on the process of engaging children and young people in decision making. Several recent studies in England have suggested that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), who chair care planning reviews for Looked After and Accommodated Children (LAAC), can help to ensure young people’s views are heard and acted upon, although feedback from children and young people suggests this does not always happen (Ofsted 2011; Pert *et al.* 2014; Dickens *et al.* 2014).

To date there have been no Scottish studies examining the role of Reviewing Officers (ROs) in supporting children and young people’s participation in LAAC reviews. In fact, very little is known about how reviews operate across the country. In contrast to England, Scottish local authorities are not required to publish data on the number of children attending their looked after reviews. The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009

require local authorities to ensure that the child's views are heard and represented at their review, and these views must be considered in the formulation of plans. The Regulations also stipulate that a child's plan must be produced which is clearly focused on achieving long term stability for the child, either through safe rehabilitation home or via permanent substitute care (Scottish Government, 2011). Ensuring the child's views have been given due consideration in the formulation of plans seems to be one of the key responsibilities of ROs; although, unlike England, there is no national guidance in Scotland about the role of ROs. In Scotland the child's right to be consulted and have their views given due consideration have been strengthened recently with the introduction of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Getting It Right for Looked After Children and Young People policy (Scottish Government 2015); neither of these documents focus on reviews in any detail so it is too early to say what, if any, impact they may have on looked after reviews.

This article will explore the findings of an action research study that sought to enhance children and young people's participation and engagement in the looked after review process by better understanding the factors impacting on participation, including the practice of ROs.

## **Methodology**

Action research is a problem solving approach to research, where the researcher seeks to work in partnership with those closest to the problem under investigation in order to plan and carry out an intervention aimed at improving practice (Lewin 1946). The process of investigating the problem and collecting data on the effectiveness of change

practices runs alongside the action and informs further stages of planning, acting and reflecting (Hart and Bond 1995); this is an approach that has been identified as particularly fruitful for enhancing participation practice (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2011). This article reports on the first full cycle of an action research project which began in May 2014 and finished in September 2015. In the first stage of the research cycle the project team, comprised of six members of a local authority review team and their academic partner, engaged in a process of reflection and data collection in order to better understand the problem of children and young people's participation in LAAC reviews; a problem that team members themselves had identified as their central priority for action. This focus on partnership and prioritising the concerns of the partners in the research is central to an action research approach (Hart and Bond 1995).

Initial investigation of the problem of children's participation in LAAC reviews drew on three sources of data: the local authority's own recently completed evaluation, purposive interviews with five staff involved in children's advocacy and rights work in the local authority, and a focus group with the ROs. As is typical in action research, the data was analysed in partnership with the project team and together we identified a number of factors influencing participation, which we felt required further investigation: preparing young people for reviews; who is at the review; where and when the review is held; the impact of participation on decision making; how plans and decisions are followed up after the meeting. The team was also curious to explore how the practices of the ROs in meetings could impact on the child or young person's participation in the meeting. There is not the scope to present all of these initial findings in detail here, however, as the article progresses it will become clear how these themes were taken up in the further stages of the first cycle of research.

In phase two of the research cycle five ROs, including the team manager, agreed to adopt a number of key actions during their review meetings aimed at enhancing the participation of children and young people and encouraging reflection. The action and survey period covered 12 working weeks from the beginning of November 2014 until the middle of February 2015. The following actions were adopted:

- All children were offered an opportunity to speak to the Reviewing Officer on their own (with one person to support them if they wished) just before the review meeting to discuss agenda items, ordering of the agenda, seating arrangements, which parts of the meeting they wanted to attend and anything else the child wanted to raise.
- At the top of the agenda for all review meetings was a focus on the 'child's views' and the 'Have Your Say' forms.
- ROs would record in the minutes how, when and by whom the child's views were sought.
- If a child had not attended a review before, or had not attended the last two reviews, the reviewing officer would visit them prior to the review and encourage them to attend.
- If a child was too young to express their views verbally then the reviewing officer would find out who was best placed to represent their views.

After each review during the survey period the five ROs participating in this project completed a four page reflective paper questionnaire which asked them to comment on a number of key areas that might be impacting on the young person's participation including: who was at the meeting, where and when the meeting was held, and score (using a Likert scale) the engagement strategies they used to encourage the child's participation and/or

enhance a focus on the child's views (if they were not present at the review). Questionnaire data was completed for a total of 69 reviews; 48 of these were for young people over the age of ten and 22 of these were for children between the ages of two and nine. All social workers attending reviews during the survey period were also asked to complete a two page paper questionnaire, 52 opted to complete a questionnaire; survey questions closely mirrored those in the reviewing officer survey.

All children and young people over the age of ten who attended reviews during the survey period were also asked to complete a two page paper survey questionnaire directly after their review and were given a £5.00 gift voucher if they did so. Twenty six young people completed the survey questionnaire which included some qualitative and quantitative questions in-order-to capture their views on: if the right people were at their review; the extent to which they were able to participate in the review; their understanding about decisions being made; who helped them to express their views; what, if any, impact they felt their views had on decision making. As there was more data relating to the reviews for young people ten years or older and we were also able collect interview data from this group, this article will focus on the data collected from the 48 reviews for young people over the age of ten.

Each young person who completed a survey was also invited to take part in a follow up qualitative interview. All the young people who wished to take part were included in the study, in total ten young people were interviewed by an experienced post-doctoral researcher between March 2015 and June 2015 and each participating child received a £20 gift voucher for participating in the interview. Four of these participants were female and six were male. They were between the ages of 12 and 18.



The survey data was managed and analysed using the general purpose statistical software package, Stata. Qualitative data was analysed using a thematic approach, with the support of Nvivo software, themes were closely related to the key study questions (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). There were a small number of qualitative interviews and each of these sought to capture the young person's unique participation journey, looking at barriers and enablers to participation and how these changed over time. Barriers and enablers were compared across respondents and notes on each child's journey were compared to understand similarities and differences over time and map intersecting factors such as placement stability, family conflict, etc. Data from the survey and the children's interviews was discussed at the focus group with ROs in order to enhance reflection and explore emerging interpretations.

This project was given ethical approval by the University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee and research access approval by the local authority. The local authority agreed on the basis that we would only interview children over the age of ten. The project team hope to be able to engage with younger children in a second cycle of the research. In order to ensure informed consent and prevent harm to participants a number of strategies were adopted. First, young people and social workers were provided with an information leaflet about the project and its aims at the beginning of the review. It was emphasized that they were under no pressure to participate and that non-participation would in no way impact on their care arrangements. Those young people who expressed an interest in being interviewed were followed up through their social worker and carer before the researcher made contact. Findings from the study were fed back to young people through the local authority's Young People in Care Council and shared with professionals at a Practice Panel

event. The study was part of a number of knowledge exchange projects funded by the ESRC, in collaboration with the local authority.

## **Findings**

### *Relationships are central to participation*

If they don't have a good relationship with at least one worker, whether the social worker or key worker, that is very difficult and they are less likely to come to the meeting. (RO3, Focus Group)

It [the LAAC review] just feels normal. I go into the room with X and Y and can talk about anything. (YP1, Interview)

As the quotations above suggest, ROs and young people both felt that positive relationships were central to achieving any level of participation in reviews; a finding that has emerged from numerous studies of looked after children and young people's participation in decision making (Munro, 2001; Bell, 2002; McLeod, 2007; Barnes, 2012; Pert et al. 2014). Relationships were found to be important at every stage of the review cycle including: preparation for the review, the review meeting itself, debriefing from the review, and implementing plans.

### *Preparation for reviews*

In the qualitative interviews we asked young people about who had prepared them for their review and why this was important. They told us that the level of preparation varied, and this often depended on how settled things were for them at the time and the nature of decisions to be made at the meeting. Sometimes preparations were limited to simple reminders about the upcoming meeting and encouragement to review reports and fill in the 'Have Your Say' forms. Most of the young people we spoke to were sent reports by their social workers before their review but few read these reports; some said this was because they were 'too long', 'hard to understand' and 'upsetting'. At other times preparations were much more detailed, involving multiple meetings and discussions with social workers and carers and creative activities to help young people think about and express their views. Some young people gave examples of how they were helped to prepare emotionally for meetings which often entailed contact with a parent or other family members or difficult decisions, such as those about contact.

Most of the young people spoke about their first reviews as the hardest, this was when they needed the most support to understand what was going on and needed more help to prepare. As one young person explained:

It's pretty like scary to obviously go [to a review for the first time] . . . like they are questioning you about your life and how it's going and all that stuff...I think I first went when I was about 5 and for a 5-year old to have to explain what's going on...you don't know how to...so it's kinda scary. (YP9, Interview)

Young people said it was scary because they weren't familiar with the purpose and format of reviews and it was hard to be asked lots of questions by adults. For some it was also hard because they didn't know everyone who was there and had not had time to build up the relationships that could support them to participate meaningfully.

Several young people spoke about how their feelings about reviews varied depending on how well other things in their life were going. Sometimes it was easy to go and talk about things and sometimes it was awful. This meant that what they needed from people to prepare them for reviews changed over time. ROs also highlighted how the stability of the young person's placement and how they were feeling around the time of the review could impact on their ability and/or willingness to prepare for and participate in the review. As one reviewing officer explained:

I think sometimes it is just about how things are going for the young person. For example, one young man who used to go to his reviews stopped coming. Things were just really difficult for him and I knew he just couldn't face sitting in a room with everyone going on about everything. And now it's come back and he is coming again and you can hand it [the meeting] over to him. He will decide what we are going to discuss and has control over his plan. (RO2, FG)

ROs felt reliability and continuity of relationships were important for young people; it meant that people could see them through these difficult times and help them to re-engage with their review meetings, when they were ready. Although this connection between relationships and participation has been highlighted elsewhere, this finding also emphasises the inter-relationship between factors such as placement stability and other challenges faced by the young person and their engagement with reviews.

These findings also suggest that sometimes the supportive thing to do is to allow young people to opt out of formal processes, if this is what they really need and want. So long as the relationships endure, the young person's views can still be shared and the door to more active participation remains open. Although research from Norway suggests that participation in decision making is more likely if children attend their reviews (Vis and Thomas

2009; Vis et al. 2012), attendance is not the same thing as participation. For example, Pert *et al.* (2014) found that for some young people attendance at reviews may not be an active choice, instead they feel it is something they have to do.

ROs highlighted that a lack of pre-meeting work by social workers, carers and keyworkers was a barrier to the young person's participation in the review. They felt that preparation work with the young person, on the part of these workers, should include: discussing the meeting with the young person in advance; taking time to understand their views and using creative approaches to enhance communication; discussing with them how they wished to participate and if they wanted to come to some or all of the meeting or have their views represented in some other way; giving them a choice about venue and timing, where possible; discussing the invite list and, where possible, ensuring it reflected their preferences; preparing them to deal with the emotional impact of the meeting and planning strategies they might adopt if things got difficult during the meeting. Although many of these ideas are highlighted in guidance for practitioners (e.g. Thomas *et al.* 1999; Williams & McCann, 2006) none of this material has an explicit focus on Scotland, where there is also a lack of national good practice guidance for ROs.

ROs also highlighted how important it was that social workers provided them with information about family and professional dynamics that might impact on the review. Knowledge of these things could help them to prepare a strategy to manage these dynamics and ensure that the young person's views were not drowned out by other things going on in the meeting. Dickens *et al.*'s large study involving four local authorities in England found that 'managing tensions, setting boundaries, mediating or re-engaging parents with the local authority' (2014: 8) were important to the IRO role, however, their study did not make an explicit link to these activities and children's participation in reviews.

ROs also discussed the importance of their own preparation for the review and felt that taking part in the action research had encouraged them to give further consideration to the young person's participation during their preparations for the review. Preparation and support to participate in reviews was not seen by ROs as a one off event, but rather something that should be part of the culture of the organisation and the responsibility of everyone working with the child. As one RO explained:

If participation, planning and listening to the child's views are integral to their experience of services, then the review is only one part of that, it's not going to shift all that, so it has got to fit into the culture. (RO1, FG)

#### *Who attends the review*

ROs were asked in their survey form to record who attended the review. Young people ten years or older were present at their review meetings 70.21% of the time. Social workers were the professional most likely to attend reviews and were present 95.74% of the time, followed by teachers who were present 70.21% of the time.

ROs, social workers and young people were asked to comment on whether or not the right people had attended the review. If there was someone missing they were asked to list who that missing person was. 54.05% of social workers and 65.05% of ROs said that the right people did not participate in the review. Both highlighted the parents most often missing from the review. Twenty six young people participated in the survey. Of those, 61.54% felt that the right people participated in their review. They did not always identify who was missing from the review, but when they did it was most often a family member who was missing.

Social workers and ROs were asked to comment on what impact they felt the mix of people at the review had on the child's participation. They highlighted that: having a small number of participants worked well for the young person and their willingness/ability to participate in the review; the young person participated well when they knew everyone in the room; having all those who attended engaged in the process helped the child; difficult family relationships inhibited the young person from participating in the review; the child found new people and strangers unsettling. The number of adults and strangers at reviews has been highlighted as a barrier to young people's participation by a number of other studies (Thomas, 2011; van Bijleveld et al., 2013; Pert et al., 2014).

In reflecting on these findings the ROs said in the focus group that they were concerned about the large number of professionals at many reviews, which they felt could be intimidating for young people. Young people also commented on how difficult it was to have large numbers of adults at their review. As one young woman explained:

There are people there and they are all trying to help you and they are all important people but there are still too many people. Like for a ten year old let's say going to a LAAC review having all these tall adults towering over you, there's maybe like six of them, that's really intimidating, that's really hard, even for my age that's tough.(YP10, Interview)

Interestingly this young person felt that all of those at meetings were 'important' and 'helpful' but still a deterrent to her participation.

The other crucial issue with attendance was getting the right mix of people there, particularly in relation to the attendance of family members. Although family were most often missing, the attendance of family members could also be problematic for young people's participation. As one young person explained:

Everyone was arguing and shouting basically and your sitting there like....a wee 11-year-old isn't going to say anything...like I didn't feel like I had anything that was gonna help, even though it was about me. They just had so many views and opinions about what was going on in my life I didn't feel like I could say anything because they were all so strong. (YP9, Interview)

This young person went on to explain how excluding particular family members from her review had made all the difference to her participation and that her RO had been central to making this happen. Although it is recognised that adults can limit and/ or dictate the manner of children's participation in many decision making contexts (Graham & Fitzgerald 2010), the findings of this study suggest that the complex range of participation costs and benefits for children when their parents and other family are involved in looked after reviews deserves further exploration.

#### *Where and when the review is held*

Most social workers and ROs made no comment on survey forms about the impact of the timing of the review on the young person's ability to participate in the review. Social workers and ROs who did comment felt it was important to choose a time for the review that did not conflict with other things the child was doing and felt that it was better to have reviews at the end of the school day. The limited responses suggest that timing of reviews was not of particular concern for ROs or social workers.

Few social workers or ROs commented on the impact of location on the young person's participation. Of the responses to this question, 31.25% of social workers and 20.69% of ROs felt the location of the review had a negative impact on the child's



participation, either because the young person did not seem to feel comfortable or because the location was inconvenient. However, in the focus group ROs said they felt they often had limited choice regarding venues for meetings because of a lack of appropriate child friendly meeting spaces within the local authority.

The young people we interviewed all said they preferred to have a choice about where and when their review was held and most said they were given a choice. Some felt very strongly that if a review was held in a particular location, such as their school, they would not want to attend and would feel more embarrassed. The importance of timing and venue for children and young people has been identified by other studies (Ofsted 2013; Pert *et al.* 2014). The differences between the perceptions and priorities of children and professionals may suggest these important factors are not always recognised by professionals as crucial to good practice in enhancing children's participation.

#### *The role of the reviewing officer and the purpose of the review*

[It's the Reviewing Officer's job] To make sure I've been safe, staying ok and I'm happy with the placement, they're supporting me as well. (YP2, Interview)

It's kinda like leadership about what your life's gonna be and they choose what's going to happen about your life I think. (YP5, Interview)

All of the young people we interviewed had at least a partial understanding of the role of the RO and most of them felt it was an important role, as the quotes above suggest. Most

of them identified that one of the core tasks for the RO was to hear their views, two thirds of them also identified that it included leadership or making sure that things got done.

All of the ten young people we spoke to had some positive things to say about their reviews and some negative things to say about reviews. When asked if they felt they could speak freely in the review, all those in the interview sample and 84.62% of the young people in the survey sample said that they could. 7.69% of the survey sample said that they could not speak freely, while another 7.69% felt they were not sure they could say what they wanted to say in the review.

According to the young people we interviewed, there were four principle benefits of reviews:

1. They were a place to get information so you knew what was happening; this was reassuring
2. They could make you feel people really cared and were there to support you
3. They were a place to get your views heard
4. They were a place where you could get things done or changed

Several of the young people said they went to their reviews because they did not want to miss out on important information. Surprisingly, several young people also said they felt it was easier to say some things at a review then to say it directly to their carer. Three young people gave examples of really important changes to their care plans that had been initiated through the review meetings and for this reason they felt reviews were a place they could get things done or changed. Finally, half of the young people spoke about how the reviews made them feel cared for.

On the down side, young people felt that reviews were often too long and boring and several said the discussions were confusing for them and they did not always understand what was being said. As one young man said:

When there were big words then I switched off cos I don't like big words, it makes me feel like, like I don't understand so I just switch off until they ask me and then I just say yes... (YP5, Interview)

This quote suggests that young people may sometimes seem to be participating, when in fact they are 'switched off' and that it can be difficult for young people to admit that they don't understand the discussion or ask for clarification. As this young person explained, it was easier to agree when he was unsure. This finding also highlights how easy it might be to mistake compliance for participation in situations of unequal power, adding strength to Percy-Smith & Malone's (2001:18) argument that we need inclusion of children in decision making, rather than integration; this means involving children at a much earlier stage and asking 'how do you want to participate?' instead of saying 'this is how we want you to participate'.

Most of the young people we spoke to seemed ambivalent about their reviews at least some of the time, seeing some positives but finding them difficult too, as this quotation illustrates:

Sometimes I am wishing I could get away. Sometimes they talk about really personal things and I just don't want to talk about it and I'm just like 'please get out, please get out' and sometimes it's just like I'm here because I want to be here and I've got a choice to leave but there's no point because I'd be really nosy and like 'what did you talk about? What did you talk about?' (laughs) (YP10, Interview)

*Encouraging participation during the review*

ROs highlighted that, even when the young person was well prepared and ready to share their views, it could still be a significant challenge to create a space for them to share their views in meetings. There were many reasons for this including: carers and other professionals being overly keen to discuss key problem areas and challenges from their perspective; family dynamics and family conflict; carers or professionals who were too eager to speak for the young person; the needs and difficulties presented by parents.

ROs and social workers were asked in the survey questionnaire to reflect on the strategies used by ROs to encourage the young person to participate during the review and rate these on a Likert scale. Overall, social workers were very positive about the strategies used by the ROs to engage the young person in the review, rating them successful or very successful in 88% of cases. ROs felt their engagement strategies were successful or very successful assessment 72.72% of the time. In 92.31% of cases young people said their RO was helpful or very helpful to their participation in the review; while they found social workers helpful or very helpful 84.61% of the time.

ROs were most likely to use verbal strategies to encourage participation in reviews. Verbal strategies included things like: directly asking a young person a question; summarising key issues and checking out that they had understood what was important to the young person; returning to issues that were important to the young person when the discussion became sidetracked by other professionals or family; asking particular group members to wait a moment to allow the young person the space to speak. ROs found it more difficult to identify the non-verbal strategies they used to encourage participation, although they felt these were successful in 71.43% of the meetings. This included things like eye contact and positive, open body language.

The structure of the meeting and the agenda was the other most commonly used strategy. As agreed at the outset of the action research project, ROs would discuss the agenda with the young person before the meeting and would ensure their views and 'Have Your Say' forms were at the top of the agenda. ROs also used seating arrangements to make the young person feel more comfortable.

In most meetings ROs made use of other professionals or advocates to enhance the voice of the young person and encourage participation. They did this by speaking to professionals who knew the young person before the meeting to identify who might be best placed to do this in the meeting. In some cases they would also actively encourage the social worker or key worker to find an independent advocate to support the young person to participate.

ROs felt that involvement in this research made children's participation a stronger focus in their work. They felt the action research process made them more clear and explicit about the strategies they used and more critical about their effectiveness. This is in keeping with Houston's action research with residential workers (2011) and suggests the value of action research as an aid to developing practice.

### *Impact of participation on decision making*

Just over half of social workers and 44% of ROs felt that the young person's participation had a good deal of impact on the decisions made in the meeting. In 10.81% of the reviews social workers and 4.26% of ROs felt the young person's participation determined the decisions made in the review. 21.62% social workers and 25.53% of ROs felt the young person's participation had a limited impact on the decisions made in the review. Both

identified a few cases where they felt the young person's participation had no impact on the decisions being made.

Most young people surveyed (22 of 26) felt that they understood the decisions that were being made in their review. When asked if they felt their participation made a difference in the review, 69.23% of the time young people felt that it did. However, 19.23% of the time (5 of 26), young people were not sure if their participation in the review made a difference and 11.54% of the time they felt that their participation did not make a difference to decisions.

#### *After the review*

All of the young people we interviewed said they had someone to talk to about their review afterwards. Often this was the social worker, other times it was the carer. They said this was important, it allowed them to ask questions and clarify what had been decided. It also helped them deal with any worries they had about the decisions that had been made. Several young people really appreciated how their social workers made a special effort to come and see them shortly after the review to talk about things.

As we have already noted, getting things done or changed was one of the things some young people appreciated most about their reviews. One young woman also spoke about her ongoing disappointment with the lack of action following her reviews. ROs highlighted how important follow-through and action was to ensuring young people's ongoing participation in the planning and review cycle. They saw it as one of their key responsibilities to avoid drift in care planning.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This action research study of children and young people's participation in LAAC reviews in Scotland is the first of its kind. Despite the legislative differences with England and Wales, the study highlights some similarities in terms of the challenges of ensuring children's active participation in the review process and re-enforces many messages about best practice in this area. In keeping with other studies we found that positive relationships with ROs, social workers, carers and other professionals are of central importance to achieving any level of participation from children or young people in their reviews (Thomas 2011; Van Bijleveld et al. 2015; Barnes 2012; Pert et al. 2014); adding strength to theoretical conceptualisations of children's participation which emphasise the importance of relationships (Mannion 2007; Bessell & Gal 2009) and dialogue (Graham & Fitzgerald 2010). Our findings also concur with a number of studies which have asserted that participation should be conceptualised 'as a process rather than a one-off event' (Vis et al. 2012, p. 8).

Developing these ideas, based on our own findings, we would suggest that participation in looked after reviews should be understood as a cyclical and relational process. The cyclical nature of the process can be understood in several ways. Firstly, we have found that for participation to be positive young people need people they know and trust to support them with every stage of the planning and review cycle. If this support is in place a virtuous circle can develop; with each cycle of preparation, review and action helping to develop stronger relationships with the young person and those who form the review group. Follow-through and timely action by social workers and others is central to this; as we know from a range of studies, children and young people feel they are being

listened to and involved in decision making when what they have said is acted upon in some way (McLeod 2007; Barnes 2012).

It was encouraging for us to find that so many of the young people surveyed felt that their participation did have an impact on decision making; this bodes well for their continued participation, particularly if social workers and others can continue to make it clear to them how their participation impacted on decisions and plans and that these are implemented in a timely manner. We did not ask social workers and ROs why they felt some young people's participation had such a limited impact on decision making; it would be useful for future research to explore what gets in the way of impact. As this was a small local study and the organisation of and guidance to ROs varies a great deal between local authorities in Scotland, there is an urgent need for further national research to understand how the role of ROs is organised throughout Scotland and to capture good practice. There is also a need to move beyond studies that capture retrospective accounts of participation from a limited number of participants; we need to better understand 'how things are working and what is making a difference' (Thomas 2011: 390). Further research using ethnographic methods could provide a much richer picture of the complex and inter-related factors which impinge on children's active participation in decision making processes and the power dynamics which privilege the knowledge claims of professionals and other adults over those of children (Winter 2015).

The review process is also cyclical in the sense that children and young people's lives never stand still and all human beings go through cycles of growth and change; changing the world as they are changed by it (James *et al.* 1998). This study suggests that review processes, when they are working well, can be an anchor point for children and young people and for those working with them, providing continuity and ensuring important information is understood and acted upon (Ofsted 2011, 2013; Dickens *et al.* 2014; Jellic *et*



*al.* 2014). Drawing on this cyclical conceptualisation of reviews may help workers to understand that young people may not want to engage with their review process at times, or they may want the nature of their participation to change, and we need to continue to reach out to young people and be willing to adapt our strategies to suit the needs and preferences of the young person.

Reviews have repeatedly been criticised for being adult centred and inflexible and a number of studies have called for more individualised and child centred approaches to decision making and planning for looked after children (Sinclair 2004; Thomas 2011; Pert *et al.* 2014). Organisations often feel caught between imperatives to quality assure planning processes and improve outcomes through more timely permanency planning (Scottish Government 2011), and calls to take a more individualised approach to children's participation in decision making (Children in Scotland 2006). Both of these imperatives are important and we would argue that one of the strengths of the review process is that it runs in a predictable and regulated manner that can, if it is working well, ensure those working with the child are held to account (Dickens *et al.* 2014; Ofsted 2013). This should not, however, be just about checking up on workers. Taking part in this action research project encouraged ROs to engage in a cyclical process of reflection, action, and data collection that they felt was beneficial for developing their participation practice with young people. The review cycle offers an opportunity for all those who work with a young person to regularly reflect on the work they are doing to support the young person and the progress made to implement and develop care plans; this requires willingness to spend the time considering what they have been doing and why, and to reflect on how this might be improved. Listening to what young people have to say and engaging them in meaningful dialogue is an important

aid to these reflections and can encourage change and development among practitioners and within organisations (Graham & Fitzgerald 2010; Winter 2015).

We would suggest that organisations need to think more about the cycle of worker and organisational reflection and action that should run alongside the cycle of review and planning for the young person. This could support further progress in ensuring shared understandings of what participation is and why it is important, what the best ways might be to ensure an individualised approach to participation, and how we can best work together to ensure this is happening. Strong leadership will be required at every level of the organisation if a more reflective culture, where children's active participation is on everyone's agenda, is to be achieved (Thomas 2011).

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